



Public meetings

Public meetings are gatherings called by an agency or others in positions of authority in order to tell the public what they are planning to do and to listen to the response and gather comments. They provide information on what the planning process aims to achieve and how members of the community can take part in the process. Public meetings are traditionally the normal approach to public involvement. Unfortunately, this approach does not always serve a positive purpose, but rather makes those who want to be involved in decisions feel that they are not really heard. However, Public meetings can be useful in certain situations. Primarily, they need to be conducted as part of a larger effort that includes other tools. If the meetings are part of a larger effort and public input can be shown to be a genuine part of that larger process, some benefits can be gained. In some situations, organising workshop groups with a reportback plenary session can be a more effective way of using the time that would have been used for a meeting. The opportunity for participants to present their ideas and suggestions in written form as well can raise the amount of feedback received.

Resources and requirements

Skills

- Good public speaking skills are important.
- The meeting leader should be trained in facilitating large meetings and have the trust of the attendees.

Equipment

- The meeting room should be large enough to cope with the anticipated number of attendees, and ideally should be on a neutral site.
- Posters or other graphical displays set up around the room help everyone, including early arrivals, to understand the topic better and provide time to formulate any questions.

Time

- Meetings are generally one to two hours long.
- Several days, preferably at least two weeks, are needed to prepare for the meeting.

Useful sources of information

Books

- Creating involvement. Environment Trust Associates (1994). Local Government Management Board, London.

Level of engagement

INFORMING: ★★

CONSULTING: ★

INVOLVING:

PARTNERSHIP:

Strengths

- Information can be disseminated to a large number of people at one time and in a relatively short period of time.
- Public meetings can be useful for raising awareness of the planning process.
- They generally work well in small communities when no particularly controversial issues are involved.
- They may provide an opportunity for a wide variety of interaction.
- A Public meeting that dispenses a progress report on planning efforts can be beneficial.

Weaknesses

- A Public meeting can get out of hand and diverted from its original purpose if one or a few very vocal, very animated attendees have issues that they want to raise in a public forum.
- Such a meeting can be self-defeating if allowed to proceed, but cutting attendees short can also cause serious repercussions.

Continued overleaf:

Weaknesses continued:

- This type of meeting is generally poor for consultation, debate or decision-making.
- If poorly organised, and controversial issues are being raised, an 'us versus them' feeling may be created.

- The guide to effective participation. D. Wilcox (1994). Partnerships Books, London.
- Participatory approach to natural resource management: a guide book. T. Loikkanen (1999). Forest and Park Service, Finland.

Web

- The Community's toolbox by D'Arcy Davis-Case: www.fao.org
- The Guide to Effective Participation by David Wilcox: www.partnerships.org.uk

Training

- The Environment Council: tel. 020 7632 0103 or www.the-environment-council.org.uk

This toolbox is designed to assist Forestry Commission staff when they are considering which tools they could use to involve the public in the forest and woodland planning process. For more information please visit the website at: www.forestry.gov.uk/toolbox